

Strange White House Meeting

By Paul Houston
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Washington

Last Friday Representative Charles E. Wiggins (Rep.-Calif.) was given a sneak preview of the "smoking gun" tape transcript of a dramatic White House meeting with President Nixon's chief of staff, Alexander M. Haig Jr., and chief impeachment attorney James D. St. Clair.

Just why he was invited still is a mystery to the congressman. But after hearing the meeting he did two things:

• Tore up the report notes he had made in preparation for leading the President's defense against impeachment on the House floor.

• Canceled a series of seminars at which he and nine other anti-impeachment members of the House Judiciary Committee had planned to educate other House members on the charges.

• Called House Minority Leader Carl Albert of Arizona and urged him to urge Vice President Gerald Ford, warning him against making public statements in support of the President until they sought out a briefing with Haig and St. Clair.

• Urged the expediting preparation of a statement in which he called for Mr. Nixon's resignation and said he would vote for Impeachment Article I — alleging obstruction of justice in the Watergate coverup — if the President did not resign.

When Mr. Nixon and Wiggins released their statements in close order Monday afternoon, the impact touched off a storm in the House. Impeachment sentiment already perhaps in the air, reached near-unanimity within an hour, according to Representative John B. Anderson (Rep.-Ill.).

Wiggins, relaxing in his

sleeves yesterday—with colleagues of the President and vice president playing on his office wall—recalled details of his involvement in the painful events of the last few days.

"The scenario began," Wiggins said. "When Mr. St. Clair asked me Friday afternoon to come down to the White House to talk to him and Mr. Haig. He did not indicate the subject matter."

According to Wiggins, Haig began with pleasantries, saying that he and the President appreciated the work Wiggins had been doing on the Judiciary Committee. Mr. Nixon had not spoken to Wiggins personally because "he felt it was not appropriate to talk to members of the committee," Haig told the congressman.

Getting down to business, St. Clair referred to the preparation of a tape transcript which Mr. Nixon had been ordered to turn over to U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica. St. Clair said he had come across a tape with "new information" on a June 23, 1972, meeting between the President and then chief of staff H.R. Haldeman.

St. Clair pushed a five-page transcript of the tape across the table to Wiggins. Wiggins said he read it, covered it and returned it to him, "silently and hurriedly."

"The significance of the transcript was immediately apparent to me," Wiggins said, explaining that it conflicted with public statements of Mr. Nixon that he had not tried to use the CIA to block the FBI investigation of Watergate for political reasons.

Haig asked what the disclosure of the transcript would mean.

"I said it would have an obvious dramatic impact," Wiggins related. "It would be regarded as the smoking gun—that is, direct evidence rather than circumstantial evidence—and that public re-

saction would be akin to the Saturday Night Massacre (the October 30, 1973 firing of special prosecutor Archibald Cox and the resignations of Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Department Attorney General William D. French-Smyth).

"I said the members of the Judiciary Committee who voted against Article I would have to reassess their positions because of this evidence of personal presidential participation in the coverup—in fact the only evidence, something I believed did not exist."

Wiggins said he told the President's men the tape "was so damaging that the question no longer was of impeachment in the House but of conviction in the Senate, and the President had to consider the possibility of resignation."

Haig and St. Clair said they understood that, according to Wiggins, but that "obviously it was very difficult for a staff member to raise it (resignation) with the President."

Wiggins' reply was that he understood their problem. "But I made it clear that resignation should be strongly considered by the President in the interest of the country, the Republican party and Mr. Nixon's own personal interest."

On the question of disclosure, Wiggins told the aides he thought the President had two options — claim his Fifth Amendment privilege against possible self-incrimination, or turn over the tape and transcript to Sirica and the Judiciary Committee.

St. Clair responded that there was no intention to withhold the material. Wiggins said yesterday he would have made the disclosure himself if it had been withheld by the White House.

According to Wiggins, St. Clair and Haig said they had not known of the existence of the tape until shortly before they met with Wiggins,

although the President had listened to it May 2 when he was preparing an appeal to the Supreme Court that the tape was protected by executive privilege.

Wiggins said he commented that "an awful lot of people have been led down the garden path by this" and that Haig and St. Clair "indicated they had been put upon themselves."

The congressman said the hour-long meeting ended with his pledge to keep the information confidential until the President had a chance to put a statement together.

"I don't know to this day why I was invited down there," Wiggins said. A couple of Judiciary Committee members speculated that it was simply to test the reaction of the President's most articulate defender in the House.

Wiggins said he went back to his office "greatly distressed" and spent the weekend reflecting on the kind of statement he should prepare. Still in turmoil when he finished it, he choked back tears as he read the words haltingly before television cameras.

"Falling (redemtion) with great reluctance and deep personal sorrow I am prepared to conclude that the magnificent career of public service of Richard Nixon must be terminated involuntarily and I shall support those portions of article I of the bill of impeachment adopted by the Judiciary Committee which are sustained by the evidence."